Nesta verch Rhys ap Tewdwr (c. 1080–bef. 1136)

Origin and Family

Born c. 1080. Died before 1136.[1]

Father: Rhys ap Tewdwr, Prince of Deheubarth (South Wales)
Mother: Gwladus verch Rhiwallon
Spouse: Gerald fitz Walter (c. 1075–bef. 1136) (Gerald de Windsor)

Princess Nesta (Nesta verch Rhys ap Tewdwr) had an epic life. She is a prominent figure in the medieval history of Wales. She had many children from as many as five fathers. Some say she was a willing participant who used her beauty to her advantage, while others believe she was a brave, resourceful woman who overcame many obstacles in her life.

The name Nesta derives from Agnes. The Latin form is Nesta, which translates to Nest in the Welsh language. As the daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr, the Prince in Wales, Nesta enjoyed a privileged upbringing behind castle walls at Dynevor Castle, Llandilo, Carmarthenshire, Wales. The castle view was much the same as the modern photo below.

The princess and her brothers, Gruffydd (1081-1137) and Hywel were the children of Rhys ap Tewdwr, who was said to be an old man (seventy plus) when they were born. Rhys was constantly at war with his neighbors and the Normans. In 1081, Rhys achieved a tenuous peace with King Henry which allowed him to stay in power. However, after several skirmishes, he finally died in battle with the Normans in 1093. For Nesta, probably 12 or 13 at the time, it meant the end of her youth and innocence.

King Henry I (Henry Beauclerc) , upon hearing of her beauty, appointed himself her protector and brought her to his castle at Windsor. The King planned to subjugate Wales through political means as well as by warfare, so having the Welsh princess in his possession might restrain the Welsh. It must have been a difficult time for Nesta – forced to live with the people who had killed her father and who spoke a foreign mixture of French and English. Her brother Hywel was imprisoned by Arnulf de Montgomery in Pembroke where he probably died, and her other brother

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Gruffydd was taken to Ireland for safety. During her first year at Windsor, the Normans launched a full-scale invasion of South Wales, killing many of her countrymen.

King Henry I was a man of little restraint. He had many wives and mistresses, and he fathered more children than any other monarch. All but two of his estimated 24 children were illegitimate. At some point while still a teenager, Nesta became one of Henry's mistresses. Some say she was willing as Henry provided her with safety and protection. Regardless, Nesta accepted her fate and helped create a supportive family network to deal with the many women and children involved with King Henry I.[8]

Life with Gerald de Windsor

After the successful defense of Pembroke castle in 1095 by its castellan Gerald de Windsor, King Henry I arranged for the marriage of Nesta to Gerald. Although it was very unusual for a Norman to marry a non-Norman, the king reasoned that such a marriage would strengthen his hold on South Wales and make it legitimate in the eyes of the native Welsh. It is also said that Gerald, seeking to increase stability for himself and his colony of Flemings, initiated the courtship of Nesta and that the King merely permitted Gerald to win her hand. By this time, Princess Nesta was known as the most beautiful woman in Wales. She was still a young girl, possibly 15, when she married Gerald, who was probably in his early thirties.

Gerald acquired the Carew lands through his marriage to Nesta as her dowry to him. Together they built Carew Castle and raised their family there. During the period 1097-1109, Gerald and Nesta had four children – all of whom would become famous:

- William FitzGerald, later William de Carew (c. 1100–1173)
- Maurice FitzGerald (c. 1100–1176). Invader of Ireland
- David FitzGerald (c. 1100–1176). Bishop of St. Davids.
- Angharad FitzGerald (c. 1108–). Mother of historian Giraldus Cambrensis.

There are many suggestions that Nesta had more children during this period by Gerald as well as others, but these are dubious for several reasons. As many as 18 children are attributed to Nesta and many of them have about the same year of birth. Many families have claimed descent from Nesta in order to have a royal connection to her and her father Rhys ap Tewdwr. Also, as was the custom of the time, many powerful lords had both wives and mistresses (concubines), and this appears to be true of Gerald,[8] so some of Gerald's offspring may not have been from Nesta.

Gerald and his Flemish army were often away, fighting the native Welshmen throughout South Wales. It is said that all the knights and lords in the area were captivated by Nesta, and Gerald was constantly protecting her from their advances.[6] Apparently, he was not successful in holding back the king. In 1103, Nesta gave birth to the king's son

- Henry FitzHenry (Also known as Henry FitzRoy), (1103–1157).

Dates are notoriously unreliable in these times – some say Henry FitzHenry was born in 1099, possibly before any of Nesta's children by Gerald. It's even possible this child was born before she married Gerald, but most of the evidence appears otherwise.

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The picture to the left depicts King Henry with his mistress Nesta.

The Abduction of Nesta in 1109

Cadwgan, a Welsh prince, had achieved some level of amity with King Henry, but his son Owain ap Cadwgan was lawless. He and his band of marauders sacked many Welsh villages for plunder, and sold their captives in the Irish slave market.[4] On more than one occasion Owain had to flee to Ireland to avoid the wrath of King Henry.

In 1109, Owain, upon hearing of the beautiful Nesta, went to the castle of Cenarth Bychan to visit her as a kinswoman (Nesta was his second cousin). That night, Owain, filled with desire, abducted Nesta and her children. The abduction is documented in the medieval Chronicle of the Princes:[2]

After the abduction, she is reputed to have told Owain: 'If thou wouldst have me faithful to thee and keep me with thee, have my children escorted to their father.' Owain hastened to send back her children to Gerald.

When King Henry heard of Nesta's abduction, he was furious.[7] The abduction of Nesta led to a war, which after two or three years resulted in the return of Nesta to her husband and the retreat of Owain to Ireland. Some sources say that Nesta had two children by Owain during her abduction. She was still relatively young – in her early thirties – when she was returned to Gerald. Although Nesta was already known as the most beautiful woman in Wales, it was this abduction and war that led Nesta to become known as the “Helen of Wales”.

Owain continued his fiery ways and upon his father’s death, became a Prince of Wales. In 1114 King Henry invaded Wales, an attack mainly aimed at Gruffydd ap Cynan of Gwynedd. Owain, still very much the enemy of the king, allied himself with Gruffydd.

After peace terms had been agreed with Gruffydd ap Cynan, Owain somehow reconciled with the king. King Henry took Owain with him when he visited Normandy later that year and knighted him. Owain returned with the king in 1115 and in 1116 took arms to assist King Henry in putting down the rebellion of Gruffydd ap Rhys of Deheubarth, who was Nesta’s brother and the then-current Prince of Wales. The king also asked Gerald and his Flemish army to join the fight.

Nesta was thus witness to a conflict pitting her brother against her husband and her abductor. Nesta discovered a plot against her brother and was able to warn him, saving his life. This would have been very risky for Nesta and lends credence to the assertion that she was both brave and resourceful.

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Soon after, Gerald and his royal forces caught up to Owain and killed him, thus avenging his honor.[4,7] This did not seem to upset the king, as Gerald was not punished for his deed.

Gerald is said to have died before 1136, but he may have died many years earlier. After Gerald killed Owain ab Cadwgan, "he no longer appears in the Annals of Cambria or in the Chronicles of the Princes, the presumption is that he did not long survive his enemy".[10] At some point, perhaps after Gerald died, Nesta became the mistress or wife of Stephen de Ceredigion, castellan of Cardigan, and bore him a son,[5] Robert FitzStephen, one of the leaders of the Irish Invasion. Robert's birth year is not known, but estimated to be from 1120-1135.

Nesta later became known as "the Mother of the Irish Invasion"[6] as virtually all of the leaders of the invasion of Ireland in 1169 were said to be her sons or grandsons.

End of Life

Princess Nesta is said to have died before 1136.[1]

Nesta had from six to as many as ten children, and as stated, an impossible number of other families claim descent from her. Separating fact from fiction about her life may no longer be possible, but she was surely famous in her times and the most prominent medieval woman in Wales.

There are at least three historical novels about Nesta's life, including *Daughter of the Dragon* by Anne Bell.

Research Notes

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